

Sweet harmonies

OF ALL the pastimes to have seen their hip factor rise in the last couple of years, choirs seem one of the most unlikely. After all, the stigma of musty church halls and hymns has to be a pretty hard one to shake off.

But the practice of singing in a group seems to have managed it regardless, and is now reaping the rewards of a substantial image overhaul.

Whereas they might once have been stuffy and entirely classical-based, only for good singers and preferably those nearer to bus pass than NUS card age, now they are fun and often pop-focused, open to absolutely everyone, regardless of ability, and often find the young and (relatively) cool belting out tunes side by side with singers their grandparents' age.

Maybe it's the well-documented health benefits – both physical and psychological – that have sparked the trend, or the social appeal in an age of diminishing community cohesion.

Whatever the reason, many people who might have never before considered joining a choir are now throwing off their inhibitions and flooding the new breed of community choir that has sprung up to meet demand.

One statistic that I read recently claimed that there are now more

Think choirs are just for old people who like hymns? Think again. DAN FROST looks at choirs at the centre of a popular and almost hip renaissance, and how the trend has taken hold in South London

choirs in the country than there are fish and chip shops. And the situation in South London seems to verify the nationwide trend.

The South London Choir, based in Balham, has grown to more than 160 people since it formed in 2006. The Dulwich branch of Popchoir only formed in September last year and already has around 80 members, turning up like clockwork each week to sing everything from John Lennon to Katie Perry.

Popchoir founder Helen Hampton has been so impressed by the success that she has since opened branches in Clapham, Croydon and Barnes.

"Most people really love to sing, but I realised that unless you want to join a church choir or a choral society, where can you go to sing the kind of music you sing along to when you are making the dinner?" says Helen. "That's why I started Popchoir, and now people are turning up in their droves."

As with most things, popularity of open-minded choirs such as Helen's and the South London Choir has spread by word-of-mouth.

Virtually everyone with whom I spoke referred to the unquantifiable enjoyment they gained from each week's choir rehearsal, often speaking of it in cathartic terms, with words such as "joyful", "buzzing" and "adrenalin" regularly cropping up.

"One of the things we all joke about is that you come here tired, but when you leave you're so awake you can't get to sleep when you get home," explains MJ Paranzino, the exuberant director of the South London Choir.

"There's this pick-me-up and euphoria that happens. I see it in people's manner. They come in hunched over, looking like they've been beaten up during the day. When they leave they're skipping out the door. It's just amazing."

That singing is a healthy activity is

largely uncontested, but one very tangible benefit that both MJ and Helen have noticed is the psychological uplift it provides to people who might have been feeling low.

"I have had dozens and dozens of emails from people thanking me," says Helen. "One lady said she had had a very serious illness and had thought her joie de vivre had left her for good, but that it was now returning because of Popchoir."

Beyond the physical health and emotional uplift lies the simple joy of community engagement – with a group that can often be as diverse as the community itself. Both MJ and Helen tell me the ages of their members range from around 20 to the 70s and 80s.

"It's every kind of person, every age, every background and every skill level," says MJ. "Because at a community choir you can squeak and squawk and still have a wonderful time."

"A strong third of our members are between 20 and 35. My partner's son is 22 and he comes to the South London Choir. He's loving it because, as he says, 'There are so many fit girls there'. It used to have a stuffy stereotype, but choirs are cool now. Choirs are on the up. It's hip!"

● Visit www.southlondonchoir.co.uk or www.popchoir.com for more information.



PICTURE: JOANNA PLUMBE

VOX POPPERS:
South London Choir performing at the Royal Festival Hall e2978/C